Disaster is the Thing with Feathers: Tragedy, Voids, and the Mothman as Animist

Mo Quirk
University of Sydney

Abstract

Since his first sighting in 1966, the Mothman has captured the attention of both residents of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, and cryptozoologists across the world. This article discusses the phenomenon of the Mothman and the role he occupies in the imagination of Point Pleasant and its subsequent cryptozoological pilgrims. Utilizing the language of neo-Paganism to frame the discussion, I will demonstrate how the Mothman emerged from a void in the urbanized landscape, and how he has since come to play a key role for the Point Pleasant community. I will specifically utilize the language of animism to explain his relationships with both humans and the non-human aspects of the community. I will consider the role played by the Mothman both during in his emergence between 1966 and 1967, and following the collapse of the Silver Bridge in December 1967, which marked the end of his original appearance.

Keywords:
Mothman, cryptids, cryptozoology, animism, Paganism, voids

Introduction

In November 1966, residents of the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, began to report sightings of a humanoid figure with large wings and glowing red eyes. This creature, dubbed "the Mothman" by local press, would continue to terrorize the small town for thirteen months until the collapse of the Silver Bridge on 15 December 1967. These events inadvertently put Point Pleasant on the map as a significant site of paranormal activity. To this day, what would otherwise be just another town in America is known for the strange events, and in recent years

the community appears to have embraced its reputation. In the five decades since his[1] first appearance, the Mothman has been subject to a great deal of speculation, much of which surrounds what exactly he is and what his appearance signified all those years ago. However, just as much attention has been paid to *why* Mothman is remembered with such interest, even so long after his last "official" sighting.

This article discusses the phenomenon of the Mothman and the role he occupies in the imagination of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Utilizing the language of neo-Paganism to frame the discussion, I will demonstrate how the Mothman emerged from a void in the urbanized landscape, and how he has since come play a key role in the Point Pleasant community, using animism to explain his relationships with both humans and the non-human aspects of the community. I must clarify that the purpose of this argument is not to claim that the residents of Point Pleasant themselves engage in Paganism, nor do I believe that the original sightings were influenced by such practices. Rather, the *language* of Paganism is used here to describe the sort of role that Mothman plays in the town. Another necessary point of clarification is that when I discuss the Mothman, I make no statement regarding his ontology. The question of whether or not the Mothman has ever actually existed is not a matter up for discussion. This article will treat the Mothman as real in as far as the phenomenon of the Mothman was real, being experienced by residents, and continues to be "real" to residents and cryptid pilgrims to this day.

To begin, this article will outline the role played by animism in Pagan worldviews, especially as it pertains to relationships between humans and the landscapes they inhabit. Particularly, this discussion will consider spatial voids, especially as they appear adjacent to human habitation. Next, we will recount the appearance of the Mothman in Point Pleasant between 1966 and 1967, culminating in the collapse of the Silver Bridge. This will be used to construct an understanding of the Mothman as he existed at that time, grappling with his relationship with the residents of Point Pleasant and what he came to signify. Finally, this article will consider the transformation undergone by the Mothman between 1967 and the present, taking into account his adoption as something of a totem by the town, and his ongoing role in culture and in cryptozoology. Additionally, I will discuss the emergence of cryptozoological pilgrims and their interest in Point Pleasant as a destination. Throughout, we will discuss how Mothman can be approached using the language of animism, and ultimately build a greater understanding of his role and relationship with the residents of Point Pleasant.

Paganism, Animism, and Voids

Before discussing Paganism, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the word. It has been used throughout history to refer to non-Abrahamic religious practices that existed peripheral to normative Christian societies.[2] In the last century, however, the term has come to refer more

[1] While no accounts specifically mention the Mothman's sexual anatomy, he has historically been referred to using he/him pronouns from the very first media reports on sightings, likely due to the "-man" suffix in his moniker. As such, I will be using these pronouns (and male-gendered language in general) to refer to the Mothman throughout this article.

[2] Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis, 'Introduction', in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1.

specifically to eclectic modern spiritual practices, including Wicca, Druidry, shamanism, and goddess worship, among others; this is generally referred to as neo-Paganism.[3] The root of this renaissance can be traced to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, one of the most influential occult groups in recent history, which emerged in the late nineteenth century. The Hermetic Order specifically pioneered the appropriation of existing non-Christian mysticism to create an esoteric foundation for magical practice.[4] The emergence of modern Paganism has been the subject of considerable academic inquiry, with a number of competing definitions offered. For the purposes of this article, Michael York's definition is most relevant. He describes contemporary Paganism as emphasizing sacred relationships and experiences that reach beyond monotheism and exists outside of conventional institutionalized religious practices, and specifically notes a common reverence for tangible living things and the unseen participating spirits that inhabit them.[5] There are, of course, an endless number of various practices that are included in this definition, and (neo-) Paganism is most appropriately used as an umbrella term. Many of these worldviews place a great deal of emphasis on the role of the environment, especially in the ongoing face of climate disaster. This interest is closely linked to animism, which has itself undergone a transformation in the neo-Pagan emergence.

In its older context, animism was defined as belief in a soul or other metaphysical essence that differentiates living things from inanimate objects.[6] New animism is not dissimilar from this but is distinct in its emphasis on communal nature of living things, generally believing that other-than-human persons should be treated with the same respect as human persons.[7] As Kathryn Rountree explains, when contemporary Pagans engage with a landscape, their interactions can be described as a kind of family reunion; "a recognition, celebration, and embodied performance of kin relationships with the earth's seen and unseen inhabitants and constituents, present and past."[8] This is not to say that flora and fauna are treated in precisely the same way as other humans. Rather, the relationships between them, and between humans and non-humans, are considered kinship of the same importance as human kin connections, and they are each handled in their own distinct way which may or may not resemble the relationships shared by humans. This subsequently informs aspects of society such as allocation of rights to group membership, economic resources, residential locality, occupation, transference of social status, inheritance of property, and intergenerational relations.[9] As Graham Harvey summarizes, new animism holds that "the world is a community of persons, only some of which are human, but all of whom deserve respect."[10] Engaging with nature is

[3] Kathryn Rountree, 'Performing the Divine: Neo-Pagan Pilgrimages and Embodiment at Sacred Sites', *Body & Society* 12, no. 4 (2006): 96.
[4] Nevill Drury, 'The Modern Magical Revival', in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, eds. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 13.
[5] Pizza and Lewis, 'Introduction', 1.
[6] Graham Harvey, 'Animist Paganism', in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 394.
[7] Harvey, 'Animist Paganism', 395.
[8] Kathryn Rountree, 'Neo-Paganism, Animism, and Kinship with Nature', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 2 (2012): 305.
[9] Rountree, 'Neo-Paganism, Animism, and Kinship with Nature', 308.
[10] Graham Harvey, 'Paganism and Animism', in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, eds Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (London: Routledge, 2016), 213.

not a matter of asking whether something is alive, but of asking how it should be treated.[11]

New animism reflects the emphasis placed on the environment by many neo-Pagans. It is unavoidable that a great deal of the theory surrounding animism refers to natural landscapes. In reality, as of 2020, 56% of the world's human population lives in urban centers, with this number increasing every year.[12] As such, new animism must consider relationships not only in forests and oceans, but also in cities and suburban areas. Here, humans are poised to consider balanced relationships with green strips and animals such as the humble pigeon, but it also brings a consideration of exactly what is included within animism. Indeed, while it is not uncommon to hear urban centers described as impersonal or dead spaces due to their remoteness from the natural environment, the emerging New Materialist movement calls into question the assumption that there is nothing substantially "alive" to be found in urban and suburban locations. Specifically, it considers the relationship between humans and the matter around them, reframing interactions as dynamic and mutual.[13] In this way, while not directly referring to Animism, many works on New Materialism follow identical lines of thought regarding the relationship between human and non-human beings. While inanimate matter is not treated with the same precise kinship as living non-human things, it nonetheless instils the urban and suburban with a sense of life and even agency that is not present in traditional, cynical views of the landscape. In this way, the city and the town can be contextualized as sacred landscapes with their own complex society formed by the beings and matter who inhabit them. Neo-Paganism is thus able to consider both natural and human-made places within an Animist worldview. However, not everything in the landscape fits neatly into this categorization.

The void is itself a somewhat esoteric concept. Historically, it is usually associated with a nihilistic worldview, which emphasizes the absence of substantial meaning in life and the looming presence of eternal darkness that characterizes non-existence. Recently though, the void has undergone something of a reconsideration in academia, being snatched from the jaws of nihilism and instead utilized as a sociological concept. Simply put, it is invoked when nothingness itself is a key aspect of an interaction; when a relationship is attempted but fails due to an absence of another party. This draws heavily on Jacques Lacan's idea of The Thing: an unknowable object that resists signification and as such recontextualizes all concepts around it.[14] Specifically, it causes an observer to question why those concepts cannot aid in identifying The Thing, allowing for greater insight into what is signified in those concepts that are identifiable.[15] Within animism and the urban landscape, the void plays a role in highlighting the signifiers that exist around it. One common instance in which this can be identified is industrial ruins. As Tim Edensor describes, ruined urban spaces are understood as "somewhere in which nothing happens and there is nothing".[16] If animism emphasizes the relationship

[11] Harvey, 'Paganism and Animism', 213.
[12] 'Urban Development', Understanding Poverty, *The World Bank*, updated 20 April 2020. At https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview#:~:text=Today%2C%20some%2056%25%20of%20the,world%20will%20live%20in%20cities.
[13] Melinda H. Benson, 'New Materialism', *Natural Resources Journal* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 257.
[14] Oliver Keane and Paul Kingsbury, 'Raising Sasquatch to the Place of the Cryptozoological Thing', in *A Place More Void*, eds. Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2021), 218.
[15] Keane and Kingsbury, 'Raising Sasquatch to the Place of the Cryptozoological Thing', 218.
[16] Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 8.

between human and non-human individuals, including aspects of the landscape, then the abandoned urban place can be likened to a person's relationship with a corpse: they cannot properly engage with it as it is, only with the memory of what it once was and what it once signified. It casts further light the ontology of everything around it. This constitutes a void by virtue of its instability. Industrial ruins signify concepts adjacent to themselves; they are "the hole from which all signification issues".[17] Thus, we can identify the position of abandoned urban places within urban animism. They are, as Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor describe, "the spectors and memorialized departed, the afterimages of bygone episodes, the ghost towns and the industrial ruins where the past is tangibly present."[18] Having lost their significance, they become voids, and as such trouble the relationships between humans and the world around them. Humans project onto their environments, but the void resists this and thus cannot respond. With this understanding of animist relationships with the non-human world, including the voids that exist within it, we can thus progress to considering how this approach can be used to describe the phenomenon of the Mothman.

The History of the Mothman

The first reported sighting of the Mothman occurred on the night of 15 November 1966. Two teenage couples – Roger and Linda Scarberry, and Mary and Steve Mallette – were driving on the outskirts of Point Pleasant, West Virginia.[19] A small town with a population between 5000 and 6000 at the time, Point Pleasant is surrounded by the McClintic Wildlife Management Area, a naturalized zone home to a number of native species, especially birds.[20] This area also notably houses an abandoned wartime industrial site, known colloquially as the "TNT area" due the undetonated explosives that still sit in the abandoned factories.[21] As the teenagers passed through the TNT area, they saw a pair of enormous, glowing red eyes peering out from the darkness of the buildings. As the car drew closer they could see the humanoid figure of a winged biped, standing over seven feet tall. The driver, Roger Scarberry, immediately began to drive away, but the creature suddenly flew up into the air and gave chase.[22] Even when the car's speed reached over 100mph, the creature kept pace; it was only once they made it to the city limits that their pursuer abandoned its chase. The spooked teenagers immediately went to the Mason County Courthouse to report the incident. The police investigated the location of the alleged sighting but found no evidence of the strange creature. Despite this, the story soon spread around the small town, being featured in the newspaper and igniting interest in the TNT area. At some point during this period the press began to refer to the reported creature as "the Mothman", referencing the villain Killer Moth of the 1950s *Batman and Robin* comic series.[23]

[17] Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor, 'Introduction', in *A Place More Void*, eds. Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2021), 6.
[18] Kingsbury and Secor, 'Introduction', 15.
[19] Joe Laycock, 'Mothman: Monster, Disaster and Community', *Fieldwork in Religion* 3, no. 1 (2008): 74.
[20] 'Population of Point Pleasant, WV', *Population.us*, accessed 9 August 2022. At: https://population.us/wv/point-pleasant/.
[21] Deborah Dixon, 'A Benevolent and Sceptical Inquiry: Exploring 'Fortean Geographies' with the Mothman', *Cultural Geographies* 14, no. 2 (2007): 196.
[22] Dixon, 'A Benevolent and Sceptical Inquiry', 196.
[23] Laycock, 'Mothman', 75.

Over the next thirteen months, there were over one hundred reports of a large humanoid in the TNT area with wings and glowing red eyes. Many of these included pursuits by the creature identical to that described by the original four observers; other included feelings of dread leading up to the encounter, a strange sensation of being compelled towards the creature, and a scream that was so loud it caused a television set to explode.[24] These were from not only Point Pleasant residents, but also from tourists who were drawn to the town by reports of the paranormal. One such pilgrim was journalist John A. Keel, who was at the time investigating UFO sightings and would soon develop his theory of ultra-terrestrials, positing that aliens did not in fact come from outer space, but from other dimensions. Keel was attracted largely by the spike in UFO sightings that occurred in Point Pleasant at the same time as sightings of the Mothman; his attention was soon drawn to the creature when he experienced an encounter of his own. He would later record the events in his 1975 book *The Mothman Prophecies*.[25] He describes entering a building in the TNT area, accompanied by a handful of others, when suddenly one of the women in his group screamed and dissolved into hysterics, claiming to have seen "two big red eyes" staring at her.[26] Others reported a tall figure fleeing the scene, which police originally assumed was Keel himself. Another woman suddenly found that her ear was bleeding, and that the atmosphere was "oppressive… heavy."[27] While Keel did not bear witness to the creature himself, he does recall "one curious experience".

> As I passed a certain point on one of the isolated roads I was suddenly engulfed in fear. I stepped on the gas and after I went a few yards my fear vanished as quickly as it came. I continued to drive, eventually returning again to the same spot. And again a wave of unspeakable fear swept over me. I drove quickly away from the place and then stopped, puzzled. Why would this one stretch of road produce this hair-raising effect? … Once again, when I reached that particular point the hair tingled on the back of my neck and I became genuinely afraid. When I emerged from the other side of this invisible zone I stopped and got out of my car. The air was perfectly still… not even a bird call.[28]

When Keel returned to the spot the next day, the "invisible zone" had disappeared. This high-profile encounter only fueled rumors of the Mothman's potential origin, with some claiming it was a supernatural creature, while others believed that it was the remains of a human who had been mutated by chemicals dumped in the TNT area.[29] A small number of people who sighted the Mothman subsequently reported visits from Men in Black who were gathering information on the creature for the government; these alleged encounters are discussed at length in *The*

[24] Jeffrey J. Kripal, 'On the Mothman, God, and Other Monsters: The Demonology of John A. Keel', in *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions*, eds. April D. DeConick and Grant Adamson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 249.
[25] John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies* (London: New English Library, 1975).
[26] Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies*, 100.
[27] Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies*, 101.
[28] Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies*, 102.
[29] Laycock, 'Mothman', 75.

Mothman Prophecies.[30] Overall, the atmosphere of Point Pleasant over those thirteen months was somewhat hysterical, with law enforcement baffled by the prospect of managing a seemingly supernatural force threatening the town.

The anxiety that characterized Point Pleasant during this period ultimately came to a head on 15 December 1967, exactly one year and one month after the initial sighting by the Scarberries and Mallettes. During the evening rush hour, the Silver Bridge, which connected Point Pleasant to Gallipolis, Ohio, collapsed under the weight of the traffic, killing forty-six people and injuring dozens of others.[31] The failure was the result of a faulty eyebar in a suspension chain; at the time it was the worst highway accident in American history.[32] When the town was rocked by this disaster, sightings of the Mothman abruptly came to a halt, with the last reports taking place just hours before the accident. The proximity of the Silver Bridge disaster to the Mothman sightings quickly led the two events to become inextricably linked in the minds of Point Pleasant residents and Mothman enthusiasts alike. Some claimed that it was the Mothman himself that caused the collapse, while others posited that he was a herald seeking to warn the town of the danger in advance. In the ensuing years, Mothman has been interpreted in myriad ways, including as an alien, a spirit, an angel, and a demon.[33]

Here, it is vital to address how the Mothman is framed within culture; specifically, his classification within cryptozoology. "Cryptids" are a type of pseudoscientific animal, found only in anecdote and lacking any concrete scientific evidence of their existence. Classic examples include species such as the Sasquatch, Chupacabra, and Jersey Devil. Since its appearance in the last 1960s, the Mothman has come to be classified as a cryptid and has seen great popularity in cryptozoology circles. However, the Mothman lacks many of the features commonly associated with cryptids. For instance, he is generally not considered to be one of a species, but a singular entity, a feature that notably clashes with the "zoology" aspect of cryptozoology. Additionally, the Mothman emerged much more suddenly than other cryptids, most of which have a traceable history in records such as First Nations traditions. For instance, the North American Sasquatch can be linked back to narratives of the Hupa, Karok, Tolowa, and Yurok Indigenous groups.[34] There are some claims that the Mothman is a spirit invoked by the Shawnee chief Cornstalk, who was killed by colonists in 1777 in what was then Fort Randolph and was said to have cursed the land with his dying breath.[35] I am hesitant to treat this with the same legitimacy as an Indigenous narrative, however, given that it is an account

[30] Laycock, 'Mothman', 75. Men in Black are a common topic among groups occupied with conspiracy theories and the paranormal. The Men in Black are allegedly a government body who visit people who have had apparent paranormal (often UFO) encounters. The Men in Black reportedly interrogate these individuals on their experiences, often intimidating them into keeping their story a secret and not alerting the press. These agents have also been described as displaying paranormal abilities of their own, to the extent of appearing inhuman. Accounts of these men include their pale skin and bright red lips, as well as their unnatural movements, sometimes compared to a creature still learning to be human. These reports are unsubstantiated, but their ubiquity in UFO circles is of interest.

[31] Simon J. Sherwood, 'A Visit to Point Pleasant: Home of the Mothman', *Paranthropology* 4, no. 1 (2013): 31.

[32] Sherwood, 'A Visit to Point Pleasant', 31.

[33] Laycock, 'Mothman', 76.

[34] Thomas Buckley, 'Monsters and the Quest for Balance in Native Northwest California', in *Manlike Monsters on Trial* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 152.

[35] Clarke, 'The Mothman of West Virginia', 272.

by Europeans of an apparently magical Indigenous person, a genre of narrative that is highly racialized and colonial.

As such, it can be safely said that the Mothman appeared out of nowhere in 1966. Finally, the Mothman is distinct from his cryptid brethren by virtue of his paranormal abilities. While creatures such as the Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster are certainly legendary, they are notably understood to not possess any actually supernatural traits aside from their resistance to identification. This is in stark contrast to contemporary descriptions of the Mothman's paranormal abilities such as compulsion, the ability to move at 100 miles per hour, and, of course, his unnaturally glowing red eyes. What the Mothman *does* share with other cryptids is a certain aesthetic of mystery and the undiscovered wilderness, as well as its nature as a purely anecdotal creature. It can be concluded that while Mothman can be discussed as a cryptid, the categorization is not concrete. As such, I will subsequently discuss Mothman's status as a singular mythical entity, rather than a cryptozoological animal. While there is certainly a great deal of insight to be gleaned from researching Mothman as a cryptid, this is not the aim of this article.

A Body Made of Void

There are myriad angles from which one may approach the Mothman; it is appropriate to begin by considering the intensely local nature of his body. Mothman is inextricable from Point Pleasant and the landscape around it. Compared to other "cryptids", the Mothman occupies a fairly limited space, with the TNT area constituting just 5.71 square miles of land. In comparison, Loch Ness is 21.77 square miles in size, and its alleged monster is crucially limited in its movements by its aquatic nature. The Mothman has no such physical limitations, and yet apparently remains in the small area by Point Pleasant. It should be noted there have been other alleged sightings of the creature at the sights of other great disasters, such as Chernobyl and 9/11, but these reports are generally made after the incidents have occurred, often years after the fact. This is inconsistent with the 1966-1967 sightings, which took place before the collapse of the Silver Bridge. As such, I believe it is justifiable to count these as outliers and maintain that the Mothman's home remains the TNT area.

The TNT area is an industrial ruin, specifically a post-war relic. During World War II, it was a manufacturing facility for ammunition, employing several thousand people at the height of the war. The buildings that stored that explosives are of particular note, as they were built into the landscape rather than on top of it, camouflaged beneath the hills.[36] Following the conclusion of the war in 1945, the facility was closed and subsequently abandoned; this included several bunkers that still housed explosive materials.[37] In the ensuing years, the area was converted into the McClintic Wildlife Management Area. Yet even as decades have passed, the location has never fully transformed into a natural area, as the old buildings remain even as flora and fauna have thrived around them. As such, those who enter the space cannot engage with it as a natural environment; they must always ruminate on the history marked by

[36] Claire O'Neill, 'Welcome to the 'TNT Area,' Home Of The Mothman', Daily Picture Show, *NPR*, published 23 January 2012. Available at https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2012/01/23/145334460/welcome-to-the-tnt-area-home-of-the-mothman.

[37] O'Neill, 'Welcome to the 'TNT Area'.

the ghostly edifices. Kingsbury and Secor refers to spectral geographies as "[tangling] up the string of temporal lineality" and engaging experiences of the uncanny, traits that be clearly identified in the TNT area's muddling of urban and natural. In both categories, the TNT area lacks something. In the sense of the urban, it lacks human presence and production; in the sense of the natural, it lacks the peace of the fully non-human environment. As such, the TNT area is a void, contextualising the elements around it but troubling attempts to identify its own signification; it is Lacan's Thing as a location. As described above, it follows that the dynamic between the TNT area and the human residents of Point Pleasant is multifaceted, built on a foundation of absence and muddling. It is therefore highly significant that the Mothman finds his home there. Indeed, the voidness of the space casts a great deal of light on the construction of the Mothman as a body imbued with meaning, yet simultaneously resisting signification.

In many ways, the Mothman's body is an extension of the void of the TNT area. He is a non-human, apparently paranormal entity whose origin appears to be the post-war ruins. In this sense, he could not have been created by just any type of location on earth, as he embodies the uncanniness of an area reclaimed by nature yet still posing danger due to what was previously produced there. He *is* the intersection of human abandonment and natural growth, being both a non-human but distinctly human*oid* being. Here, it is crucial to frame the Mothman's body as a monstrous one. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen identifies in his chapter "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", the monster's body is *always* a cultural object constructed from humans' relationships with the environment around them.[38] The Mothman is the result of the material landscape of Point Pleasant, and due to the location's function as a void, the body constructed from that landscape will inevitably be monstrous and personify the conspicuous absence. The exact details of the Mothman's appearance are also a reflection of this. His wings reflect the area's status as a bird sanctuary, while the rest of his figure is human. Further, reports of his glowing red eyes demonstrate an ability for the Mothman to be ignored. The sense of dread associated with sightings is also in its own way ineffable: no one knew what the Mothman might do if he caught them, but they know they must avoid it at all costs. Overall, it is highly significant that the Mothman himself *made no sense at the time*. Unlike other "cryptids", he is not based on a pre-existing concept from local First Nations narratives, nor is he a manifestation of a known urban legend. There was no context for his emergence, and in grappling with this, the residents of Point Pleasant were forced to reconsider how they engaged with the environment he suddenly inhabited.

This association of monsters with disaster is nothing new. Perhaps the most famous instance of this kind of rationalization is Godzilla (*Gojira*), who was originally constructed in the aftermath of the end of World War II, specifically the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, Godzilla's status as a monster embodying disaster has only evolved since his first appearance in 1954. Significantly, the franchise's reboot in 2016 was greatly informed by the triple disasters of 2011, when Japan saw an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown within twelve months.[39] In both of these iterations, Godzilla embodies the disasters, and in some way makes sense of them. Crînguța Irina Pelea explains,

[38] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.

[39] John Schneiderwind, 'Godzilla as the Bridge: The Destruction of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima', *Arcadia* 24, no. 1 (Summer 2020).

> [Godzilla] becomes a coherent cinematic expression for the trauma of the atomic war, or otherwise said, the ultimate signifier of the nuclear holocaust, mass-destruction, and the dramatic economic and social development of a country in agony, thus it invites to a broader reflection on the nuclear theme. Similarly, the visual aggressiveness of the scenes where Godzilla attacks cities replicates almost identically the horrors witnessed by Japan when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed.[40]

Crucially, Godzilla represents the impact of man-made disasters on the natural environment; he is nature retaliating against the atrocities committed by humans. In this way he provides some sense of meaning to the events, embodying the impact of war and ultimately advocating for peace. This is similar to the role of Mothman in Point Pleasant. There are obvious similarities between Godzilla and the Mothman in their initial associations with the violence of World War II – in Godzilla's case, the atomic bomb, and in the Mothman's, the town's role in producing arms. These similar origins led both to embody the lingering regret and tragedy of the loss of life in the war. Further, their later interpretations – Godzilla representing the triple disasters of 2011 and Mothman as a herald of the Silver Bridge Collapse – demonstrate an ongoing search for meaning in the face of loss of life. By attributing these disasters to monsters, a lesson can be drawn. In both cases, there is a sense of retribution; of nature taking revenge on humans who forget it can take back power at any moment. Godzilla's association with the ocean made it the perfect candidate for catharsis following the Pacific Ocean earthquake and subsequent tsunami, while Mothman's role as terrorizing force has since interpreted as a reminder of how a single events (be it an encounter with a paranormal agent or the collapse of a bridge) can impact a community.

Returning to animism, we can now place the Mothman's role as an embodiment of the relationship between the people of Point Pleasant and the non-human entities that formed the landscape. All of the discomfort and separation that they felt towards the TNT area and its beings has been collected into one phenomenon. Due to the nature of this relationship, it was inevitable that the reaction to Mothman would be fear; indeed, the sense of dread commonly reported to accompany sightings is a direct manifestation of unease that comes with Animist engagement between humans and a fractured landscape. This is not to claim that the residents of Point Pleasant thought of their encounter with Mothman using (neo-) Pagan language. Rather, the language of Animism is a useful tool to describe how the residents interacted with the environment surrounding the town, and subsequently how they thought of the Mothman sightings. Ultimately, between November 1966 and December 1967, the Mothman served as an Animist medium for the uncomfortable position of the TNT area and the complex co-existence between the natural landscape and starkly man-made ruins of war. The discomfort of this role further points to the complicated nature of his appearance, a complexity which warrants further consideration.

[40] Crînguța Irina Pelea, 'Exploring the Iconicity of Godzilla Popular Culture. A Comparative Intercultural Pespective: Japan-America', *Postmodernism Problems*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2020): 20.

The Void of Mothman Present

For forty years following Mothman's appearance, he became something of a totem of Point Pleasant. In 2001, the town held its first annual Mothman festival, consisting of vendor stalls, live music, and public lectures, all themed around the legend.[41] This coincided with – or perhaps began – a renewed interest in the Mothman, with Keels' book *The Mothman Prophecies* being adapted as a film adaptation the following year. Starring Richard Gere, his version fictionalized Keel's account and added a mystery element in order to create a more contained narrative, though it retained the major aspects of the book, including the intense atmosphere of simultaneous dread and compulsion surrounding the creature.[42] During the 2003 Mothman festival, a 12-foot statue of the creature was unveiled in the center of town. The effigy was sculpted by Bob Roach and commissioned by Charles Humphries, the Executive Director of the Mason County Development Authority.[43] Since then, the festival has continued to take place every year in the third week of September, although the 2020 and 2021 events were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it returned in 2022. As it has grown, the festival has seen the inclusion of a 5km charity run, cosplay competitions, and private tours through Mothman-relevant locations in the area surrounding the town.

These festivities demonstrate a marked shift in Point Pleasant's perception of the Mothman; far from a terrifying herald of doom, he is now almost a mascot of the town. Joseph Laycock in particular notes the commonalities between Mothman's role in Point Pleasant and the properties of a clan totem as defined by Emile Durkheim, especially in the coherence and a sense of identity that the creature brings to the community.[44] Laycock identifies the Silver Bridge collapse as the key point at which the Mothman went from terror to totem. The fact that the bridge collapsed purely be chance, and that the forty-six deaths could have been easily prevented, characterized the tragedy as one devoid of meaning or ideology; in such circumstances, it is common for communities to scramble to find a way to contextualize the loss of life. The timing and proximity of the Mothman sightings led to the two events being associated with one another, with the Mothman being interpreted as a herald. In this way, he became deified in the narrative of the Silver Bridge collapse.[45] Laycock explains that "By connecting the disaster and the Mothman, the bridge collapse becomes part of the sacred and possibly unknowable mystery."[46] In the fifty years since the events, the Mothman has become an icon, both commemorating the loss of life and giving it meaning.

The status of Mothman as a mysterious and iconic cryptozoological figure cannot be understated. Indeed, visiting Point Pleasant, and in particularly the Mothman statue, has become something of a pilgrimage for budding cryptozoologists. This is especially true during the Mothman festival, during which the town's population more than doubles. Several

[41] Johan Smits, 'Mothman Festival 2022, West Virginia, USA', Travel Begins at 40, published 2019. At https://www.travelbeginsat40.com/event/mothman-festival-west-virginia-usa/.
[42] Kripal, 'On Mothman, God, and Other Monsters', 250.
[43] Robert J. Kruse II, 'Point Pleasant, West Virginia: Making a Tourism Landscape in an Appalachian Town', *Southeaster Geographer* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 324.
[44] Laycock, 'Mothman', 82.
[45] Laycock, 'Mothman', 79.
[46] Laycock, 'Mothman', 81.

businesses in the town offer tours of the TNT area both during the festival and throughout the year, and these services are highly popular with Mothman pilgrims. In visiting where the Mothman was once sighted, travelers can experience the same anticipation, and perhaps dread, felt by those who encountered the creature during the 1960s. The experience is one of aesthetics: mystery, suspense, and a strange mix of hope and dread. In this way, despite having no officially acknowledged appearances since December 1967, the Mothman endures as an animist force in Point Pleasant. Paradoxically, it is this strong association with mystery that makes Mothman quantifiable in a way that he was not during the height of sightings. He carries connotations of the paranormal, the unexplained, and as such has become a symbol for those things. We do not know what the Mothman *is*, but we are certain of what he *represents*. By disappearing, the Mothman became more understandable.

It is this provided meaning that problematizes the previous status of the Mothman as a void. Originally, he was utterly unknowable, his emergence being entirely devoid of context and subsequently transforming residents' view of the area he inhabited as they attempted to make sense of the strange circumstances. Following the Silver Bridge collapse, however, the Mothman was suddenly thought of very differently. As the two events became inextricable in the mind of Point Pleasant, Mothman quickly became contextualized by his proximity to disaster. This shift saw the Mothman transform from *The* Thing to merely *a* Thing; rather than resisting signification, his role as signifier was now his most important trait. Mothman transforms from the void to a known quantity; a herald of disaster, and most significantly a part of the town, rather than a distorted reflection of it.

Returning to Animism once again, we can map the modern standing of Mothman in Point Pleasant. Where he once acted as a manifestation of the relationship between the human residents and the TNT area, he now serves as an embodiment of the relationship between the people and the event of the Silver Bridge collapse. In the wake of such a tragedy, the question emerges of the cosmic reason for such loss of life, and inevitably edges into New Materialism when searching for justification for the failure of an inanimate object. Regardless of whether he is interpreted as messenger or perpetrator, the conflation of the Mothman with the event sanctifies and in some way justifies the tragedy. The reason for its occurrence is still unknown, but it appears that there *is* a reason. Even if the mystery is never solved, it is preferable to the idea that it was a meaningless accident.

Conclusion

The legacy of the Mothman continues to enthrall paranormal enthusiasts across the world. Originally a strange, terrifying monster who embodies the void between the natural the man-made, he has since become symbolic of the unknown and the unexplained. It is this prescribed meaning that makes him such a key part of Point Pleasant's history. His role is one of catharsis, providing a point of reference for the town to begin healing from the disaster that rocked their community. That the Silver Bridge Collapse seemingly had no meaning was solved by the Mothman's presence, as he serves as a reminder that some things will forever remain mysterious. In the wake of tragedy, this is a far easier framework for healing than the idea that the accident was entirely absurd and without philosophical consequence. Even if the meaning can never be determined, the Mothman is evidence that it exists.

The Mothman's role in Point Pleasant has transformed greatly since the teenagers' first encounter in 1966. He has gone from a mysterious body at the crossroads of nature and humanity to a symbol for all things mysterious and unexplained. By using the language of animism, further contextualized by reference to New Materialism, we can build a more holistic understanding of how Mothman has been understood and engaged with across time. Within an animistic framework, we can identify the Mothman as real, not in the sense of physicality, but in his position as an embodiment of the town and its surroundings. Indeed, the suitability of the language of animism in describing the Mothman indicates potential for this framework to be applied to other instances of so-called "cryptids" in the future. Entities such as the Sasquatch and the Jersey Devil occupy similar spaces in their landscapes as embodiments of the strange and unexplained, and a great deal of insight could be gained in considering them as animist encounters.